

Heroides 5 (Oenone to Paris): loeb translation

Will you read my letter through? or does your new wife forbid? Read—this is no letter writ by Mycenaean hand! It is the fountain-nymph Oenone writes, well-known to the Phrygian forests—wronged, and with complaint to make of you, my own, if you yourself allow.

What god has set his will against my prayers? What guilt stands in my way, that I may not remain your own? Softly must we bear whatever suffering is our desert; the penalty that comes without deserving brings us dole.

Not yet so great were you when I was content to wed you—I, the nymph-daughter of a mighty stream. You who are now a son of Priam—let not respect keep back the truth!—were then a slave; I deigned to wed a slave—I, a nymph! Oft among our flocks have we reposed beneath the sheltering trees, where mingled grass and leaves afforded us a couch; oft have we lain upon the straw, or on the deep hay in a lowly hut that kept the hoar-frost off. Who was it pointed out to you the coverts apt for the chase, and the rocky den where the wild beast hid away her cubs? Oft have I gone with you to stretch the hunting-net with its wide mesh; oft have I led the fleet hounds over the long ridge. The beeches still conserve my name carved on them by you, and I am read there OENONE, charactered by your blade; and the more the trunks, the greater grows my name. Grow on, rise high and straight to make my honours known! O poplar, ever live, I pray, that art planted by the marge of the stream and hast in thy seamy bark these verses:

IF PARIS' BREATH SHALL FAIL NOT, ONCE OENONE HE DOTH SPURN< THE WATERS
OF THE XANTHUS TO THEIR FOUNT SHALL BACKWARD TURN.

O Xanthus, backward haste; turn, waters, and flow again to your fount! Paris has deserted Oenone, and endures it.

That day spoke doom for wretched me, on that day did the awful storm of changed love begin, when Venus and Juno, and unadorned Minerva, more comely had she borne her arms, appeared before you to be judged. My bosom leaped with amaze as you told me of it, and a chill tremor rushed through my hard bones. I took counsel—for I was no little terrified—with grandams and long-lived sires. 'Twas clear to us all that evil threatened me.

The firs were felled, the timbers hewn; your fleet was ready, and the deep-blue wave received the waxed crafts. Your tears fell as you left me—this, at least, deny not! We mingled our weeping, each a prey to grief; the elm is not so closely clasped by the clinging vine as was my neck by your embracing arms. Ah, how oft, when you complained that you were kept by the wind, did your comrades smile!—that wind was favouring. How oft, when you had taken your leave of me, did you return to ask another kiss! How your tongue could scarce endure to say “Farewell!”

A light breeze stirs the sails that hang idly from the rigid mast, and the water foams white with the churning of the oar. In wretchedness I follow with my eyes the departing sails as far as I may, and the sand is humid with my tears; that you may swiftly come again, I pray the sea-green daughters of Nereus—yes, that you may swiftly come to my undoing! Expected to return in answer to my vows, have you returned for the sake of another? Ah me, 'twas for the sake of a cruel rival that my persuasive prayers were made!

A mass of native rock looks down upon the unmeasured deep—a mountain it really is; it stays the billows of the sea. From here I was the first to spy and know the sails of your bark, and my heart's impulse was to rush through the waves to you. While I delayed, on the highest of the prow I saw the gleam of purple—fear seized upon me; that was not the manner of your garb. The craft comes nearer, borne on a freshening breeze, and touches the shore; with trembling heart I have caught the sight of a woman's face. And this was not enough—why was I mad enough to stay and see?—in your embrace that shameless woman clung! Then indeed did I rend my bosom and beat my breast, and with the hard nail furrowed my streaming cheeks, and filled holy Ida with wailing cries of lamentation; yonder to the rocks I love I bore my tears. So may Helen's grief be, and so her lamentation on finding herself without a mate; and what she was first to bring on me may she herself endure!

Your pleasure now is in jades who follow you over the open sea, leaving behind their lawful-wedded lords; but when you were poor and shepherded the flocks, Oenone was your wife, poor though you were, and none else. I am not dazzled by your wealth, nor am I touched by thought of your palace, nor would I be called one of the many wives of Priam's sons—yet not that Priam would disdain a nymph as wife to his son, or that Hecuba would have to hide her kinship with me; I am worthy of being the consort of a man who wields great power; my hands are such as the sceptre could well beseem. Nor despise me because once I pressed with you the beechen frond; I am better suited for the purpled marriage-bed.

Remember, too, my love can bring no harm; it will beget you no wars, nor bring avenging ships across the wave. The Tyndarid run-away is now demanded back by an enemy under arms; this is the dower the dame brings proudly to your marriage-chamber. Whether she should be rendered back to the Danai, ask Hector your brother, if you will, or Deiphobus and Polydamas; take counsel with grave Antenor, find out what Priam's self persuades, whose long lives have made them wise. 'Tis but a base beginning, to prize a stolen mistress more than your native land. Your case is one that calls for shame; just are the arms her lord takes up.

Think not, too, if you are wise, that the Laconian will be faithful—she who so quickly turned to your embrace. Just as the younger Atrides cries out at the violation of his marriage-bed, and feels his painful wound from the wife who loves another, you too will cry. By no art may purity once wounded be made whole; 'tis lost, lost once and for all. Is she ardent with love for you? So, too, she loved Menelaus. He, trusting fool that he was, lies now in a deserted bed. Happy Andromache, well wed to a constant mate! I was a wife to whom you should have clung after your brother's pattern; but you—are lighter than leaves what time their juice has failed, and dry they flutter in the shifting breeze; you have less weight than the tip of the spear of grain, burned light and crisp by ever-shining suns.

This, once upon a time—for I call it back to mind—your sister sang to me, with locks let loose, foreseeing what should come: "What art thou doing, Oenone? Why commit seeds to sand? Thou art ploughing the shores with oxen that will accomplish naught. A Greek heifer is on the way, to ruin thee, thy home-land, and thy house! Ho, keep her far! A Greek heifer is coming! While yet ye may, sink in the deep the unclean ship! Alas, how much of Phrygian blood it hath aboard!" Her voice was in full career when her slaves took the raving girl away; my golden locks stood stiffly up. Ah, all too true a prophetess you were to my poor self—she has them, lo, the heifer has my pastures! Let her seem how fair soever of face, none the less she surely is a jade; smitten with a stranger, she left behind her marriage-gods. Theseus—unless I mistake the name—one Theseus, even before, had stolen her away from her father's land. Is it to be thought she was rendered back a maid, by a young man and eager? Whence have I learned this so well? you ask. I love. You may call it violence, and veil the fault in the word; yet she who has been so often stolen has surely lent herself to theft. But Oenone remains chaste, false though her husband prove—and, after your own example, she might have played you false.

Me, the swift Satyrs, a wanton rout with nimble foot, used to come in quest of—where I would lie hidden in covert of the wood—and Faunus, with horned head girt round with sharp pine needles, where Ida swells in boundless ridges. Me, the builder of Troy, the illustrious god of the lyre, loved, and let my hands into the secret of his gifts. Whatever herb potent for aid, whatever root that is useful to the healer grows in all the world, is mine. Alas, wretched me, that love may not be healed by herbs! Skilled in an art, I am left helpless by the very art I know.

The aid that neither earth, fruitful in the bringing forth of herbs, nor a god himself, can give, you have the power to bestow on me. You can bestow it, and I have merited—have pity on a deserving maid! I come with no Danai, and bear no bloody armour—but I am yours, and I was your mate in childhood's years, and yours through all time to come I pray to be!